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Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*

Introduction

It is now thirty years since George Lindbeck provided, in *The Nature of Doctrine*, an epitome of his approach to ecumenical dialogue, and an affirmation of related ways of studying religion and practicing theology.¹ The approach that he set out was one that had been growing on him through two decades of involvement in ecumenical dialogues, and the book was intended as a brief prolegomenon to a much longer work that would summarise those dialogues' achievements and prospects.² Despite its brevity and its introductory nature, however, the argument of the book is unexpectedly knotty: its various strands require careful teasing out, and the ways in which they are woven together are sometimes difficult to unravel. This paper is an attempt to do this teasing out and unravelling: to reconstruct the argument of *The Nature of Doctrine*, both by

¹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984) – henceforward *Nature*. All writings cited below are by Lindbeck unless otherwise stated. My reading has, as will be evident, been influenced by various writings by Bruce Marshall, including 'Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian', *The Thomist* 53.3 (July 1989), 353–402, 'Absorbing the World: Christology and the Universe of Truths' in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69–102, and 'Lindbeck on What Theology Is', *Dialog* 31 (Winter 1992), 44–7, and by C.C. Pecknold, *Transforming Postliberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism and Scripture* (London: Continuum, 2005). I am grateful for comments on an earlier version of this article from Jake Andrews, Peter Ochs and three anonymous readers for this journal.

² *Nature*, p. 8.

offering a redescription of its overall shape, and by suggesting clarifications and reorderings that can untangle some of its most significant knots.

I will be arguing that, as Lindbeck himself has repeatedly said, *The Nature of Doctrine* is a book addressed to ecumenists, indeed that it is fundamentally *about* ecumenism; I suggest that it can be read as a proposed reordering of the practice of ecumenism in the light of ecumenism's most basic commitment. I will also be arguing, again in line with Lindbeck's own later comments on the book, that the use he makes of non-theological ethnographic approaches to religion is an *ad hoc* borrowing, strategically important but not as foundational for his presentation as some of his rhetoric suggests. And, finally, I will be arguing that Lindbeck's proposed reordering of ecumenism is not simply consonant with, but is made possible by, and contributes to, the emergence of a postliberal way of doing theology – though I will also suggest that the emergence remains incomplete in *The Nature of Doctrine*.

In all this, I write this as someone who recognisably stands somewhere in the tradition of postliberal theology that Lindbeck helped to inaugurate, but also as someone who has for a long time been puzzled by *The Nature of Doctrine*. I have not known quite what to make of it, nor been able to see how it stands in relation to the tradition that I now inhabit. In this article, therefore, I am looking backwards within the tradition within which I stand, trying to understand how to narrate its emergence – and trying to understand what a return to this strange book might have to contribute to a continued thinking through of the postliberal project.

The Nature of Doctrine was the work of a mature theologian. Lindbeck was born in 1923 in Loyang in Central China, where his parents were Lutheran

missionaries.³ From China, he was sent to Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota for a BA, and thence to Yale Divinity School for a BD.⁴ After leaving Yale, he specialized in medieval scholasticism, and spent time at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto and at the University of Paris, before returning to Yale for a PhD on Duns Scotus.⁵ Most of his earliest publications were on medieval philosophy: on Scotus, on Aquinas, on Pierre D'Ailly, and on medieval Aristotelianism.⁶

This programme of study was, however, simply a preparation for his intended focus on contemporary Catholicism – or, as it turned out, Lutheran–Catholic ecumenical dialogue.⁷ In 1962, just shy of his fortieth year, the expertise and connections he had gained through his medieval studies led to his being

³ 'Confession and Community: An Israel-Like View of the Church', *The Christian Century* 107.16 (May 6 1990), pp. 492–6; reprinted in Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 1–9: pp. 2–3; cf. 'Performing the Faith: An Interview with George Lindbeck', *Christian Century* November 28 2006, pp. 28–35: p. 28.

⁴ 'Biographical Sketch' in *Guide to the George A. Lindbeck Papers*, compiled by Adam Eckhart, Christine Luckritz and Martha Lund Smalley (New Haven, CT: Yale Divinity School Library, 2010), p. 6; available online at drs.library.yale.edu:8083/fedora/get/divinity:172/PDF.

⁵ *Is Duns Scotus an Essentialist?*, unpublished PhD thesis (Yale University, 1955).

⁶ E.g., 'A Note on Aristotle's Discussion of God and the World', *The Review of Metaphysics* 2 (September 1948), pp. 99–106; 'A Great Scotist Study', *The Review of Metaphysics* 7 (March 1954), pp. 422–35; 'Participation and Existence in the Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas', *Franciscan Studies* 17 (1957), pp. 1–22, 107–25, and so on.

⁷ Interview with John Wright, published in Wright (ed.), *Postliberal Theology and the Church Catholic: Conversations with George Lindbeck, David Burrell and Stanley Hauerwas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), pp. 55–76: pp. 56–57. See also 'George Lindbeck' (Interview) in Patrick Granfield, *Theologians at Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 151–64: pp. 151–2.

appointed as a Delegated Observer from the Lutheran World Federation to the Second Vatican Council and as a Research Professor of the Lutheran Foundation for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg – staying there until 1964.⁸ Thereafter, he was an ecumenical theologian above all else, and most of his publications over the next twenty years treated specifically ecumenical topics. He eventually became co-chair of the International Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue.

In 1974, Lindbeck, now in his fifties, was invited to deliver the St Michael's Lectures at Gonzaga University, and devoted the three talks to Bernard Lonergan's recently published *Method in Theology*,⁹ and specifically to asking what sense Lonergan's understanding of doctrine allows one to make of claims about the irreformability or infallibility of some doctrinal definitions. The decision to turn the lectures into a book was quick, but the process slow. A few years later, he had a typescript of a book called *Theories of Religion and 'Method in Theology': An Encounter with the Thought of Bernard Lonergan* – a revision of the lectures in which 'the overall argument has been recast in such a way that it no longer focuses, as did the original, on the permanence . . . and infallibility of doctrines, but rather deals in a broader way with the relation of theories of religion to theological methodology.'¹⁰ Eventually, however, that typescript was revised still further – and acquired a new title and extra material in return for an abandonment of the focus on Lonergan. It was finally published in 1984, when

⁸ Interview with John Wright, p. 62.

⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

¹⁰ From the Preface of a typescript of the book, annotated by Lindbeck's colleague Hans Frei, in the Yale Divinity School Library collection of Hans Wilhelm Frei Papers (RG 76), 22–301.

Lindbeck was in his sixties, as *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*.

Four Cultures

In order to understand the choreography of Lindbeck's argument better – and to clarify some of its ambiguities – I am going to borrow and modify one of Lindbeck's own tools. Lindbeck was an 'early adopter' of the idea that, by analogy with Thomas Kuhn's analysis of the progress of science, theology could be described as a succession of 'paradigms'. Already in 1963 he was talking about theological 'frameworks' that 'resemble scientific hypotheses each of which tries to give the most adequate account of the facts,'¹¹ and by 1972 he was explicitly citing Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹² The word 'paradigm' has, however, acquired connotations of immobility, uniformity, self-sufficiency and incommensurability that make it all but unusable for my purposes. I have chosen, instead, to use the word 'culture'.¹³

¹¹ 'Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal', *Religion in Life* 33 (1963), pp. 383–94; reprinted in *New Theology* 2, ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 183–97: pp. 189–90.

¹² See, for instance, *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1972); reprinted in *Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 120–42: p. 139.

¹³ Cf. Lewis Ayres' identification of 'theological cultures' in *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 274–278. Instead of 'cultures', I could have spoken of 'interpretive publics' or 'regimes' or 'subcultures' – and one or other of these has been urged on me by readers of earlier versions of my argument, unconvinced by my choice. 'Culture' is an imperfect choice, certainly, but I have not yet found an alternative that better serves my purposes.

By 'culture' I mean a roughly identifiable subsection of the world of theological debate, extended in space and time, within which the participants seem on the whole to be seriously engaged with one another. Within such a culture, one might typically be able to identify a set of key texts that 'everyone' has read, or claims to have read, or feels they ought to have read, or has seen commented upon so frequently as to feel no need to read. There might be key journals or publishing houses that are seen as the premier locations for contributions to the culture's debates, and there might be a range of habitual genres into which those publications fall. There might be key institutional locations – departments, conferences – which are seen as central to the maintenance of the culture's arguments. And there might be an evolving and contested set of core intellectual practices and assumptions, including ideas about what counts as a good argument, what counts as telling evidence, and so on.

I do *not* mean by 'culture', however, to name something monolithic, nor something invariant while it lasts, nor something incommensurable with other cultures. In fact, any identification of a culture can only be an identification for some particular purpose: not a separating of the theological world at its natural joints, but an inevitably artificial classification for the sake of some broader intellectual project – and the typical move in such a broader intellectual project, after the identification of distinct cultures, might be to show how several such cultures are in fact messily in play in some text or contribution that could otherwise have seemed simple. That will certainly be the pattern here.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cultures can also be identified at multiple scales – though, as a rule of thumb, if there is only one participant it is not a culture but an eccentricity.

For the purposes of clarifying Lindbeck's argument, then, I identify four cultures that are in play in *The Nature of Doctrine*.

1. Official ecumenical culture

The world of official ecumenical dialogue is perhaps the most obvious example of a culture in the sense defined above: a distinctive tradition of enquiry, sustained by distinctive practices of formal dialogue, conducted in distinctive institutional locations, published in distinctive genres. It is easy at first glance, if not at second, to think of the realm of official ecumenism as a world unto itself, with its own language and rituals.

Lindbeck's interest in ecumenical questions was already evident in the 'fifties,¹⁵ but it was his involvement in Vatican II that made the world of official ecumenism his primary intellectual home.¹⁶ It was, specifically, the world of

¹⁵ In 1950 he attended a debate in Paris between Protestants and Catholics hosted by Jean Daniélou about the newly promulgated dogma of the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – one of his earliest substantive ecumenical experiences (Interview with John Wright, p. 59). For his earliest ecumenical publications, see 'Interconfessional Studies', *Lutheran World* 6 (1959), pp. 315–20; and 'A New Phase in the Protestant–Roman-Catholic Encounter?' (Review of Hans Küng's *Rechtfertigung*), *The Ecumenical Review* 11.3 (April 1959), pp. 334–40.

¹⁶ Lindbeck's writings on Vatican II are voluminous. See for example 'Liturgical Reform in the Second Vatican Council', *Lutheran World* 10.2 (April 1963), pp. 161–71; 'The Future of Roman Catholic Theology in the Light of the First Session of the Second Vatican Council', *Dialog* 2.3 (Summer 1963), pp. 245–253; and 'The Constitution on the Church: A Protestant Point of View' in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), pp. 219–30; see also his contributions to the book he edited: *Dialogue on the Way: Protestants Report from Rome on the Vatican Council* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), pp. v–ix, 8–17, 231–52. His most sustained reflection on the council and its implications is *The Future of*

Lutheran–Catholic dialogue that became his,¹⁷ and his own speciality within that world was an ongoing grappling with Catholic claims about papal infallibility as they related to the Lutheran *sola scriptura*.¹⁸

2. Liberal theological culture

The second culture that shapes Lindbeck's book is much more diffuse. I use the rather general phrase 'liberal theology' only because I have not hit upon anything better, but I have in mind the kinds of theological activity that would

Roman Catholic Theology: Vatican II – Catalyst for Change (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). See also 'Reminiscences of Vatican II', an address delivered in 1993 and reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 10–18.

¹⁷ Amongst Lindbeck's contributions to these dialogues, see 'The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church: Some Questions from Lutherans to Roman Catholics' in *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue I–III, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965–7), pp. 11–15; 'Papacy and Ius Divinum: A Lutheran View' in *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 193–208; and (with Vilmos Vajta), 'The Augsburg Confession in Light of Contemporary Catholic–Lutheran Dialogue' in *The Role of the Augsburg Confession: Catholic and Lutheran Views*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 81–94.

¹⁸ See, for example, 'Reform and Infallibility', *CrossCurrents* 11.4 (Autumn 1961), pp. 345–56; *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, ch. 5; 'The Infallibility Debate' in *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. John J. Kirvan (New York, Paulist Press, 1971), pp. 107–52; and *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture. Lindbeck's apparent concern with the Marian doctrines was always really a concern with the claims about their infallible status; see, for example, 'Reform and Infallibility', p. 352; 'Roman Catholicism on the Eve of the Council'; 'The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology', *Concilium* 3.1 (1967), pp. 64–72 – all the way through to *Nature*, ch. 5.

have looked to Lindbeck like they constituted the mainstream of European and American theology from the 'sixties on into the 'eighties. My claim above that 'any identification of a culture can only be an identification for some particular purpose' is especially pertinent here: it is only the attempt to make sense of the dynamics of Lindbeck's argument that justifies the papering over of so many cracks, and the decision to name as a single culture such an unruly and diverse range of theological contributions. For simplicity's sake, the culture I have in mind might be defined (at least from the mid 'seventies to the mid 'eighties) as the world in which one might reasonably expect one's interlocutors to be familiar with Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, and might expect their discussions of it to make reference to Rahner, Metz or Küng on the Catholic side and, say, Tillich, Pannenberg or Moltmann on the Protestant.

The world so defined is certainly not one in which consensus reigns with regard to either theological substance or theological method; indeed, it is better to see it as a culture shaped by a range of familiar disagreements. Most importantly, for my purposes, it involves an overlapping range of tensions between conservative and progressive, or between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, or between left and right.¹⁹ To use Lindbeck's own categories, it

¹⁹ I do not mean to suggest that these various tensions are identical – simply that there are some telling resemblances between them. For insight into an older form of this culture, one can refer to Lindbeck's description of Yale Divinity School in the 1940s and 1950s, and the tension between the approaches of his teachers Robert L. Calhoun and H. Richard Niebuhr (see 'Introduction: Calhoun as Historical Theologian' in *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*, ed. George A. Lindbeck (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), pp. ix–lxx). Though Lindbeck, in his account of that culture, deploys the word 'liberal' very carefully to name various substantive and methodological positions *within* it (xxiv–xxxvi), my

is a culture comprising both cognitive-propositionalists and experiential-expressivists – indeed, a culture constituted in part by the arguments between these two sides. (To give broad-brush definitions: the former are those for whom theology is the investigation and arrangement of propositional truth claims, the latter those for whom theology explores symbolic expressions of deep religious experiences of the transcendent.)

The liberal theological culture that I have in mind includes those experiential-expressivists and cognitive-propositionalists who are substantially engaged with each other, but excludes both those at the propositional end who will have nothing to do with the likes of Rahner, Tillich and Moltmann, and those at the expressivist end who have no remaining use for traditional doctrinal claims. This culture is, perhaps, weighted towards the expressivist side of the divide – but not to the exclusion of various forms of propositionalism.²⁰

usage would include the *whole* world of discourse shaped by the Calhoun/Niebuhr difference. It is true that Hans Frei described Calhoun as making a transition to a ‘post-liberal pattern of thought’ (Hans Frei ‘In Memory of Robert L. Calhoun’, *Reflection* 82 (1984), pp. 8–9: p. 8), but Lindbeck rightly explains that this is not yet the unhyphenated postliberalism that he himself was to develop, even if there were elements in Calhoun’s post-liberalism that fed Lindbeck’s later postliberalism (‘Calhoun as Historical Theologian’, n. 10, p. xviii).

²⁰ *Nature*, pp. 16–17. It would have been simpler to stick with Lindbeck’s typology: cognitive-propositionalist / experiential-expressivist / cultural-linguistic, mapped on to preliberal / liberal / postliberal. Sadly that won’t do, for cognitive-propositionalists appear in two guises: first, there are classical or preliberal ahistorical propositionalists who are dismissed with little serious attention; second, there are historically aware propositionalists exhibiting a form of propositionalism that mediates between classic propositionalism and experiential-expressivism, and who are much more serious conversation partners – and who clearly occupy a position *within* the theological mainstream that I am trying to describe (see *ibid*, pp. 104–8). Given that

It is clear from Lindbeck's writings in the 1960s that when he was not directly engaged in ecumenical debate this liberal theological culture was his intellectual home.²¹ Much of what he says could pass for cultural commonplaces. He repeatedly draws a contrast, for instance, between a static, preliberal, two-storey picture of the world (heaven above and earth below) and a now much more convincing, and much more convincingly modern, dynamic and eschatological picture,²² supported by the findings of historical criticism.²³ Spending one of the common currencies of the liberal theological culture, he insists upon the transformative centrality of historical consciousness to our ways of thinking,²⁴ and recasts the transcendent not as a static reality somehow 'above' the world, but as the future that God has for the world, towards which the world is, by the grace of God, heading.²⁵ Lindbeck is fond of claiming in the 'sixties that this kind of thinking represents some kind of theological consensus – and, although it is

Lindbeck places Lonergan and Rahner in this latter category, any neat separation of his targets into propositionalists and expressivists is clearly impossible.

²¹ See, e.g., his see his deep regard for Tillich in 'Natural Law in the Thought of Paul Tillich', *Natural Law Forum* 7 (1962), pp. 84–96.

²² See, e.g., 'The Constitution on the Church'; 'The New Vision of the World and the Ecumenical Revolution' in *Religious Education* 62.2 (March–April 1967), pp. 83–90 and *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, *passim*.

²³ See 'Ecumenism and the Future of Belief', *Una Sancta* 25 (1968), pp. 3–17, reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 91–105: p. 101.

²⁴ See, e.g., 'The Framework of Catholic-Protestant Disagreement' in *The WORD in History: The St. Xavier Symposium*, ed. T. Patrick Burke (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 102–19: pp. 106–7.

²⁵ 'Framework of Catholic-Protestant Disagreement', 107–8; *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, pp. 19, 44.

not hard to think of many who might have thought rather differently, there is no doubt that this strand of Lindbeck's early thinking is one firmly woven into the overall tapestry of liberal theological culture.

3. The culture of ethnographic religious studies

We also need to consider another intellectual milieu, some distance from the liberal theological culture just described: the emerging culture of ethnographic religious studies. This is not a culture in which Lindbeck was directly a participant, but he was certainly a keen observer. He discusses it extensively in *The Nature of Doctrine*: it is 'not specifically . . . theological', but is evident in 'a considerable body of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature'.²⁶ He cites Marx, Weber and Durkheim as precursors, but it is clear that this culture relies more proximately on the philosophy of Wittgenstein and is coming to fruition in the philosophy of Peter Winch and, above all, the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz.²⁷

The emergence of Lindbeck's interest in this culture can be traced from about the beginning of the 1970s. By 1970, he is citing Wittgenstein and talking about the ways in which affirmations of faith and official dogmas operate within the context of religious language systems and forms of life.²⁸ By 1972 he is citing Kuhn.²⁹ By 1973, he cites Peter Beger, Thomas Luckmann, and Clifford Geertz, and speaks about 'many empirically-oriented theories of religion' in which

²⁶ *Nature*, pp. 8, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁸ 'The Infallibility Debate', pp. 108, 110.

²⁹ In *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture, p. 139.

‘Religions are seen, not as expressions of the depth or transcendental heights of human experience, but as systems of ritual, myth, belief and conduct which constitute, rather than being constituted by, that which is most profound in man, e.g., his existential self-understanding’.³⁰

In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck explains that this kind of religious studies takes an approach to religions focused not on experiences of the transcendent at their core, nor on systems of propositions in which their beliefs might be codified, but on the patterns of habitual practice that constitute religious communities and give them recognisable identity over time. A religion is seen as ‘a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought’ – hence Lindbeck calls this a ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach. In such an approach, a religion can be seen as a vocabulary of symbols (‘doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives’), and a set of ingrained habits governing the deployment of this vocabulary in practice – habits that may be described as akin to the practical grammar of a living language. This set of contingent skills, acquired by practical apprenticeship in the religion, form the medium through which the religious person encounters and interprets the world – and enables them to identify what is ‘maximally important’.³¹

³⁰ ‘Unbelievers and the “Sola Christi”’, *Dialog* 12 (1973), pp. 182–9; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 77–87: p. 86. Cf. ‘*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non Christians: Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Positions’ in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 92–123.

³¹ *Nature*, p. 33.

4. Postliberal theological culture

The fourth culture that is in play in *The Nature of Doctrine* was only just in the process of emerging as Lindbeck wrote: the postliberal theological culture. In 1979, he named the emerging culture ‘postmodern “orthodoxy”’,³² but it was the name ‘postliberal’ that stuck. Of course, his book was not a manifesto for a postliberal movement, nor was there a coherent postliberal ‘Yale School’ in the ‘seventies or ‘eighties. Nevertheless, there was an emerging set of relationships, conversations and disagreements – a web of interconnections in the process of becoming tangled enough to allow us to speak tentatively about a recognisable theological culture. To visualise the process, one might picture strands of thinking that had begun their life firmly woven into the liberal theological tapestry, becoming progressively detached from it over time, and then being caught up and woven together into a new tapestry. In that context, Lindbeck’s book can be seen as a contribution to the formation of the new culture – just as were, in very different ways, the works of Hans Frei, of David Kelsey, and of various of their students.

The most obvious area in which something worthy of the name ‘culture’ was appearing was biblical hermeneutics. Biblical interpretation is a secondary theme in *The Nature of Doctrine*, but whenever it appears the work of Lindbeck’s colleague, Hans Frei, is not far behind – and David Kelsey’s redescription of Barth’s approach to scripture not far behind that. Lindbeck’s take on this hermeneutical conversation was that it centred upon the use of scripture as an overarching narrative lens through which Christians may read the world, and

³² Review of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick, *Journal of Religion* 59.2 (April 1979), pp. 248–50: p. 249.

that this scriptural narrative, when read within the forms of life of the Christian community, provide the indispensable context that gives Christian content to such words as 'God' or 'love' or 'creation'. Without this context, or some other richly particular context, claims about God, or love, or creation are simply empty.³³ In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck largely presents a summary of the views of his colleagues when he treats these matters; he went on, however, to develop a distinctive way through this territory, and although biblical hermeneutics will not be taking centre stage in what follows I shall have a little more to say about that development at the end.

The most distinctive strand that Lindbeck's work weaves in to the emerging postliberal theological tapestry is a retrieval of certain aspects of Thomism.³⁴

³³ See 'The Bible as Realistic Narrative' in *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 81–5; cf. *Nature*, pp. 119–20.

³⁴ See, as well as the article cited in note 6, 'Thomism' in *A Handbook of Christian Theology: Definition Essays on Concepts and Movements of Thought in Contemporary Protestantism*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Marvin Halverson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), pp. 361–3; 'The A Priori in Thomas's Theory of Knowledge' in *The Heritage of Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of Robert Lowry Calhoun*, ed. Robert E. Cushman and Egil Grislis (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 41–63; and 'Discovering Thomas: (1) The Classic Statement of Christian Theism', '(2) Tentative Language about the Trinity', '(3) The Origin of Man', and '(4) Hope and the *Sola Fide*', *Una Sancta* 24.1 (1967), pp. 45–52; 24.3 (1967), pp. 44–48; 24.4 (1967), pp. 67–75; and 25.1 (1968), pp. 66–73. Lindbeck describes a shift in his thinking about Aquinas brought about by his reading (perhaps in 1965? – he says 1967, but also 'two years before it was published') a pre-publication typescript of Victor Preller's book, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), and confirmed by reading David Burrell's works on Aquinas in the 1970s. See Interview with John Wright, p. 68.

Lindbeck's study of Thomas eventually led him to a distinctive combination which is close to the heart of his version of postliberal thinking: an apophatic account of the knowledge of God coupled with an insistence that it is human lives shaped together in faithful discipleship, and not propositions, that are the primary form of truth-telling about God.³⁵

Lindbeck took from his reading of Thomas in the late 'sixties a strong sense that we can know *that* our words apply to God, but not *how* they apply – we can be sure of the *significatum* but not of the *modus significandi*.³⁶ Our statements about God are not directly information-bearing in the manner of ordinary

³⁵ I am indebted to the discussion provided by Gilles Emery, 'Thomas d'Aquin postlibéral? La lecture de saint Thomas par George Lindbeck' in *Postlibéralisme? La théologie de George Lindbeck et sa réception*, ed. Marc Boss, Gilles Emery and Pierre Gisel (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2004), pp. 85–111, translated by Matthew Levering as 'Thomas Aquinas, Postliberal? George Lindbeck's Reading of St. Thomas', in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), pp. 263–90. The much-discussed 'Excursus on Religion and Truth' in *The Nature of Doctrine* claims that this approach to truth is simply required by a cultural-linguistic approach to religion. It is true that a cultural-linguistic approach to a religion must say that 'the meaning is in the use' – that is, it must say that to understand any proposition one must attend to the weave of practice within which it is made. It is also true a cultural-linguist might go further, given that specifically religious truth claims are in some way about the deepest context of people's lives, and so are self-involving in some way; to understand those kinds of claims cultural-linguistically is likely to mean attending to the way they are involved in the whole shaping of communal and individual life – and mean that one only grasps their import properly by tracing this shaping. But even saying this much leaves wide open the question of what kind of practices of referring are being engaged in by the adherents of the religion; it leaves wide open what kinds of religious reference we might be dealing with.

³⁶ Cf. *Nature*, p. 66.

propositions, even if they are true; nevertheless they have import to the extent that they shape our lived responses to God – and thereby shape the only kind of correspondence to God that is available to us creatures.

In a 1967 article on Aquinas, Lindbeck had already written,

Those who learn to speak of God rightly may not know what they are saying in any cognitively significant sense, but yet their very beings may be transformed into conformity with him who alone is the high and mighty One.³⁷

That is the ground on which Lindbeck says not just that

The fundamental way in which we come to know the essential, the infallible, truths of the faith, whether these be changeable or unchangeable, is by learning how to use ordinary Christian language correctly and effectively in prayer, praise, admonition and teaching,

but also

This is the fundamental, primary, knowledge of the faith. It constitutes that *sensus fidelium* of which the theologians speak. It is more like a skill than it is like explicit, reflective theological learning.³⁸

And, even more clearly, this is the ground on which Lindbeck is ultimately standing when he insists that Christianity as actually lived might be thought of as ‘a single gigantic proposition’ corresponding to God’s being and will.³⁹

³⁷ ‘Discovering Thomas (1): The Classical Statement of Christian Theism’, p. 51; discussed in Emery, ‘Lindbeck’s Reading’, p. 287.

³⁸ *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture, 126, my emphasis.

³⁹ *Nature*, 51. Emery is right to point out that Lindbeck’s reading of Aquinas on this point is problematic. Emery, ‘Lindbeck’s Reading of St Thomas’, p. 288.

The third and final strand of Lindbeck's postliberalism that I want to highlight is his 'catholic sectarianism'. From the 'sixties on, Lindbeck clearly believed that a new situation was arriving for the Christian church: a post-Constantinian, postmodern situation in which the church was likely to become a diasporic and, in the sociological sense, sectarian community – flourishing only in communities that were visibly distinct from their surrounding culture. His hope was that a form of *catholic* sectarianism might emerge, in which such distinct communities would be in intensive ecumenical communication with one another, and deeply engaged with the Christian past.

From the beginning of his engagement with Vatican II he had been attracted by the council's emphasis on the church as the people of God – the idea that 'the church is the people of God in the same thoroughly concrete way that Israel is.'⁴⁰ It was the 'visible, organized continuity'⁴¹ that interested him, though not in any sense that would allow the church to be a 'reactionary defensive ghetto'.⁴² Precisely as visible, historical and concrete, the church is to be the 'humble servant of all mankind', and can be characterised by 'astonishing openness . . . to so-called secular ideas and values'.⁴³

Lindbeck learnt from Rahner to think of the church as facing a future in which it would be a diaspora community,⁴⁴ and to think of the church's role in that

⁴⁰ 'Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal', p. 194; cf. 'A Protestant View of the Ecclesiological Status of the Roman Church', *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964), pp. 243–70.

⁴¹ 'Protestant View', p. 249.

⁴² 'Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal', p. 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

⁴⁴ 'Ecumenism and the Future of Belief', p. 92.

future as being, precisely by the loving communion between its isolated parts, a concrete 'sign and source of the eschatological unity of the divided world.'⁴⁵ This was a key element of Lindbeck's championing of an objectivist eschatology and a historicized ecclesiology: 'God is seen as guiding all that happens towards the final transformation,'⁴⁶ and in such a context the church's task

is not necessarily to Christianize the world, but to serve it by reminding it in all that it is and does of where it is heading, of what God's purposes are. It does this, not only by the words and individual lives of its members, but more fundamentally by being a communion of faith, love, and service, and by being a concrete sign and witness, however imperfect, of the Kingdom which has begun and is to come.⁴⁷

Towards the end of the 'sixties, however, Lindbeck's emphasis shifted slightly. In order to be a concrete sign, a diasporic church would need to be 'sociologically sectarian' (a phrase he was using by at least 1968;⁴⁸ a 1971 Lecture was called 'The Sectarian Future of the Church').⁴⁹ Lindbeck asked what it would take for such a diasporic, sectarian church to be 'a creative minority', socially and ethnically mixed, capable of exerting 'a quite disproportionate influence on the molding of the future' and of helping prevent a secularised world from falling

⁴⁵ 'The Constitution on the Church' (1966), p. 229; cf. *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, p. 27.

⁴⁶ 'The New Vision of the World' (1966), p. 88.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁸ 'Ecumenism and the Future of Belief', p. 92.

⁴⁹ In *The God Experience: The Cardinal Bea Lectures*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph p. Whelan (New York: Newman Press, 1971), pp. 226–43.

into totalitarianism of one kind or another.⁵⁰ It would take a kind of ‘Christian internationale’:⁵¹

a worldwide network of churches which are sectarian in the flavor and intimacy of their communal life, but which are ecumenical – or, if you prefer, ‘catholic’ – in the inclusion of rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated, alien and native.⁵²

This vision of a catholic sectarianism lies at the heart of Lindbeck’s postliberalism.

The Interplay of Cultures in *The Nature of Doctrine*

With these four cultures identified, I am in a position to set out the *apparent* structure of Lindbeck’s argument, based on a plain sense reading of the Foreword of *The Nature of Doctrine*.

Lindbeck’s long involvement in official ecumenical culture has led to him experiencing a ‘growing dissatisfaction’⁵³ in the face of a set of ‘puzzles’ that ‘have multiplied and become increasingly acute in recent times’.⁵⁴ He draws on a template offered by Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to suggest that the emergence of such anomalies and puzzles, and the experience of dissatisfaction that they generate, can be the markers of the decline of an old paradigm. They can also be heralds of a new paradigm – if, instead of increasingly implausible

⁵⁰ ‘Ecumenism and the Future of Belief’, p. 97.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵³ *Nature*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

attempts to reinterpret the data in the terms of the old paradigm, or to modify that paradigm so as to accommodate the new data, 'new concepts are found' with 'luck or skill', capable of removing the anomalies.⁵⁵

In Lindbeck's case, the dissatisfaction is a sign that liberal theological culture, insofar as it includes general theories of religion, is proving an inadequate partner to official ecumenical culture. The liberal theories of religion do not allow accounts of the nature of doctrine that match the findings of ecumenical dialogue. Specifically, those accounts of doctrine do not easily allow us to make sense of ecumenical claims that doctrines once truly opposed to one another are now truly reconcilable. Instead of these liberal accounts of religion, therefore, we should turn to ethnographic religious studies, which provides an account of the nature of religion that is not only plausible in itself, but also a more adequate partner to official ecumenism. The turn to ethnographic religious studies makes possible an account of doctrine that meshes far better than do liberal accounts with the findings of ecumenical dialogue.

A second move is consonant with this first. The liberal theological culture involves approaches to Christian theology as well as general theories of religion, and as we turn for ecumenical reasons from the liberal theories of religion we would do well at the same time to turn from the liberal theological approaches to a postliberal theological approach. The postliberal approach to Christian theology is one that is consonant with the ethnographic theory of religion, and with the account of doctrine implicit in ecumenical dialogue.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

Such a summary appears, at first glance, to be fairly clear and straightforward – and I think it does justice to Lindbeck’s explicit *claims* in the text of the book about his argument. It does not, however, capture the shape his argument actually takes as it unfolds across the pages of the book. It does not capture the strange one-sidedness of the supposed play-off between the liberal and ethnographic or postliberal cultures; it does not capture the nature of Lindbeck’s appeals to ethnographic religious studies; and it does not capture the complexity of the relationship between Lindbeck’s argument about accounts of doctrine and his presentation of his own postliberal theology. Above all, however, it does not capture the central place that the official ecumenical culture has in his argument – or, perhaps better, it does not quite capture the place that his argument has as an argument addressed to that culture. In order to understand the argument more fully, therefore, we need to examine the interplay between the four cultures in much more detail.

1. Taking leave of liberalism

We can begin our more detailed investigation with a fairly simple point. The impression given by Lindbeck that his book stages a fair fight between his proposals and those of the liberal theological culture is in one respect deeply misleading: the options available in liberal culture never really appear in the book as a plausible alternative; the descriptions Lindbeck offers of them are flat and unconvincing, and the arguments he offers against them are seldom robust. When, for instance, he says of Rahner and Lonergan that ‘they resort to

complicated intellectual gymnastics and to that extent are unpersuasive',⁵⁶ this is not so much an argument as an expression of weary incomprehension. It is as if Lindbeck's heart simply isn't in it.

In one sense, that is exactly what is going on. If a culture is a subsection of the theological world within which the participants seem on the whole to be seriously engaged with one another, Lindbeck shows that he has taken leave of liberal theological culture precisely by showing how that old culture's debates and refinements no longer come naturally to him, and by offering characterisations of it that are bound to sound wooden and implausible to insiders. His descriptions are the descriptions of someone who no longer speaks liberal.

The process by which Lindbeck fell out of love with liberalism appears to have been a gradual one: the slowly dawning realisation that the languages of the liberal theological culture did not enable him to think clearly about catholic sectarianism, of the 'need for the sake of survival to form communities that strive without traditionalist rigidity to cultivate their native tongue and learn to act accordingly.'⁵⁷ There is no moment of clean break: he is clearly a participant in liberal culture in the mid 1960s; clearly not by the late 1970s. But there is no doubt about the move. By the time he writes a review of the first volume of Ebeling's *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens* in 1981, he has long left the liberal world behind, and we find him paying elegiac respects to a 'great but passing

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–4.

tradition of academic theology' from which, sadly, 'one cannot expect much future.'⁵⁸

This, then, is the first thing that should be said about the structure of Lindbeck's argument. His descriptions of the argument suggest that it will be a tournament staged between the liberal and the ethnographic or postliberal culture, each vying for the favour of official ecumenism. His descriptions suggest that the contest will take place on level ground: anomalies will be identified in terms that all will recognise; one side will fail to resolve those anomalies; the other side will succeed.

Yet Lindbeck's account of his argument is written by someone who already speaks postliberal like a native and liberal like a tourist. Neither his claim that there are anomalies, nor his descriptions of what those anomalies are, nor his reports of the liberal failures to resolve those anomalies, nor his account of ethnographic or postliberal successes, are couched in neutral terms calculated to be as recognisable to participants in liberal theological culture as to participants in postliberalism. In fact, Lindbeck's whole narrative of anomalies, failures and successes is a part of the construal of the world that constitutes postliberal theological culture; it is told using the vocabulary and grammar that form that culture's language.

Lindbeck himself recognises that '[c]omprehensive outlooks on religion . . . are not susceptible to decisive confirmation or disconfirmation', and that any set-to between two such outlooks must be 'inconclusive'.⁵⁹ What he does not convey so clearly is that it is not simply that the outcome of the contest will be indecisive,

⁵⁸ 'Ebeling: Climax of a Great Tradition', *Journal of Religion* 61.3 (July), pp. 309–14: p. 314.

⁵⁹ *Nature*, pp. 11, 41–2.

but that the very impression that he has brought the sides together on a level enough playing field to allow a straight fight between them is misleading. Lindbeck's argument is an invitation to see the world (including the place within it of the liberalism he has left behind) from a postliberal point of view.

2. Doing justice to official ecumenism

Further questions about the shape of Lindbeck's argument occurs when we turn from the tussle between liberal and ethnographic or postliberal to the official ecumenism over which they are supposedly tussling. A crucial moment in his argument occurs when he first tells us that recourse to a cultural-linguistic theory of religion drawn from an ethnographic religious studies culture can allow the development of a 'regulative' account of doctrine, in which doctrines state rules for the governing of communal practice and discourse. 'A regulative approach', Lindbeck says, 'has no difficulty explaining the possibility of reconciliation [between hitherto conflicting doctrines] without capitulation';⁶⁰ it can therefore make sense of the claims of ecumenical dialogue in a way that liberal accounts of doctrine cannot.

I have already called into question the idea that Lindbeck in practice carries out a neutral testing of multiple accounts against a criterion that they all accept. There are several other aspects of his presentation that deserve clarification, however. First, what precisely does Lindbeck mean by an 'account of doctrine'? Second, what precisely is it to which such accounts of doctrine are supposed, in

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

his account, to do justice? And third, where precisely does Lindbeck's own regulative account come from?

I will argue that the kinds of account of doctrine that Lindbeck has in mind are primarily ecumenists' diverse construals of the doctrine-handling practices of their own culture, and that Lindbeck asks whether these construals can do justice to the most basic structure or grammar of that culture.⁶¹ It will, however, also be my contention – though I will not return to this until the final section of the article – that Lindbeck's development of his own regulative account of the reasoning practices proper to ecumenism, and his claim that this account can do justice to ecumenism's deep grammar, are made possibly by his emerging postliberal theology. In other words, my claim in this article is that Lindbeck, in *The Nature of Doctrine*, offers a postliberal repair of an ecumenical culture hobbled by its liberal entanglements.

One noticeable rhetorical feature of Lindbeck's argument is his suggestion that the various available accounts of doctrine are going to be tested against the real nature of doctrine itself: against the plain facts about how '[d]octrines . . . behave', their 'nature and function'.⁶² After all, he says, ecumenists 'have been compelled by the evidence' that doctrines once in conflict are 'now really

⁶¹ Lindbeck has himself insisted that the book was intended for 'ecumenists who were also well-trained theologians' (Interview with John Wright, p. 70). Cf. 'Vorwort zu deutschen Ausgabe', *Christliche Lehre als Grammatik des Glaubens: Religion und Theologie in postliberalen Zeitalter*, trans. Markus Müller (Gütersloh: Kaiser 1994), pp. 16–22; English original reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 196–200, as 'Foreword to the German Edition of *The Nature of Doctrine*'.

⁶² *Nature*, p. 7.

reconcilable'; and this compelling finding is 'the reality' to which theorizations of doctrine will need to do justice.⁶³ If our accounts of doctrine render these findings about doctrine incomprehensible, '[t]he proper response . . . is not to deny the reality on the grounds that it seems impossible, but rather to seek to explain its possibility. If adequate concepts for conceptualizing this possibility are not available, better ones should be sought.'⁶⁴ Lindbeck's invocation of Kuhn appears to place the discoveries about doctrine in an equivalent position to the theory-challenging discoveries about nature made by empirical science.

It therefore sounds at this point as though the official ecumenical culture itself is not really in view: it is important as the context within which certain discoveries about doctrine have taken place, but it is the nature of doctrine so discovered that will serve as a testing ground for the accounts generated by liberal theology and ethnographic religious studies. This is, however, an impression not borne out by the actual progress of Lindbeck's account. The ecumenical discovery about doctrine to which Lindbeck consistently refers is very abstract: the claimed possibility and reality of 'doctrinal reconciliation without doctrinal change'⁶⁵ – and that discovery is not a finding about doctrine that just happens to have been made in official ecumenism, but is the most basic claim about doctrine implicit in *all* official ecumenical work, as Lindbeck construes it. It is, in fact, the claim that *founds* official ecumenical culture. In his Foreword, Lindbeck insists that his question is, '[A]re there ways of understanding apparently absurd claims of ecumenical agreement that grant

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

that they may possibly be warranted, rather than insisting *a priori* that they must be mistaken?’ and not whether those claims of ecumenical agreement are *in fact* warranted.⁶⁶ The ‘apparently absurd claim’ that Lindbeck has in mind is the claim that the whole official ecumenical project is intelligible.

The ecumenical culture in which Lindbeck has been so serious a participant depends upon a basic apprehension whose origins are complex, but whose twentieth-century infectiousness is clear – an apprehension that the diversity of extant forms of Christian practice and discourse can be construed as a fundamental unity affected but by no means destroyed by serious divisions and fruitful differences. To put it in other words of Lindbeck’s: to be an ecumenist is to be committed to ‘striving always to say “yea,” and delaying our “nay” until it is absolutely forced upon us’.⁶⁷ This striving for a ‘yea’ between differing Christians is not grounded in some finding that compatibility between denominations is the unavoidable conclusion of a line of empirical investigation: it is an all-but-indefeasible trust that unity is there to be found – albeit a trust confirmed and strengthened by the actual achievements of numerous particular dialogues. It is only on the basis of such trust that commitment to the immense labour of official ecumenical dialogue makes sense. Official ecumenism is a tradition of devout practice, and to belong to it is to be committed to the possibility and reality of doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation.

What, however, are the accounts of doctrine that are apparently being tested against this basic claim that doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation is possible? When Lindbeck explains why it is that the regulative account of

⁶⁶ *Nature*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ ‘A New Phase’, p. 340.

doctrine has anomaly-removing power in relation to ecumenism, his explanations rely simply upon the point that rules can have domain-specificity in a way that timeless propositions cannot: it is easier to understand, he says, how a rule can be binding only under particular conditions than it is to understand a similar conditionality affecting an insistence that some proposition must be believed to be true. What Lindbeck appears to be offering is a construal of the quasi-legal pattern of reasoning involved in official ecumenical agreements:

Doctrines may be talked about in these agreements as if they were propositions or, in some cases, nondiscursive symbols, but they are treated as if they were rules or regulative principles.⁶⁸

This is a proposal *by* an ecumenist, *to* ecumenists, suggesting a way of reading their own ecumenical practice.

When we see it in this light, Lindbeck's proposal of a regulative account of doctrine in *The Nature of Doctrine* becomes one more episode in an ongoing story that can be traced in detail through his earlier works. His contributions to official ecumenical dialogues were often accompanied by reflections on the nature of the ecumenical practice in which he was engaged – reflections that were a blend of description (setting out the character that ecumenical practice at its most fruitful *already* had) and prescription (clarifying the character that he believed it *needed* to have in order to do most justice to the central ecumenical apprehension), with the boundary between description and prescription not strongly marked.

⁶⁸ *Nature*, p. 18.

To use my own terminology, Lindbeck's construals of the ecumenical practice in which he was involved in the 1960s and 1970s present it as a certain kind of practice of *modelling*. That is, the official ecumenical dialogues in which he was involved required various attempts to construct a common discourse from which the various differing doctrinal claims of the participant denominations could be derived (to the extent that those claims are indeed compatible) and the remaining divisions and acceptable differences named in terms recognised by all participants. By means of these attempts, the ecumenists seek patterns of reasoning that both put into operation and test the basic ecumenical apprehension of an underlying Christian unity.

Perhaps the easiest form of such modelling to comprehend is one that works in a straightforward cognitive-propositional mode – that is, one that seeks to construct a precise and coherent theological discourse from which equivalents to the claims of the various denominations involved, themselves taken as true propositions, can be deduced, or with which they can at least be shown to be compatible. One might think of an ecumenical equivalent to a scholastic *quaestio*, in which the apparent conflicts between differing statements authorised by the denominations involved are resolved by a *responsio*. The *responsio* would work by deploying a technical vocabulary and a set of distinctions to construct a position from which those apparently conflicting statements can, with appropriate specification of terms we now see to have been vague, be derived and so be shown to be harmonious.

Lindbeck's ecumenical work doesn't show us such a cognitive-propositional form of ecumenism in operation. As his dismissive comments in *The Nature of Doctrine* suggest, he regards it as obvious that a classic, preliberal cognitive-

propositionalist approach to ecumenism will fail. It will, almost by definition, be unable to do justice to historical change – to the fact that official doctrinal statements have been couched in conceptualities that are not timeless and inevitable structures of proper human thinking, but the vocabularies of particular historical intellectual cultures. The kind of propositionalism that Lindbeck dismisses would involve treating all these statements as contemporaneous, and whilst we might imagine some brittle machinery of fine distinctions deployed to demonstrate their compatibility, Lindbeck insists that, since some of those statements are direct condemnations of each other, the game will be over before it starts.⁶⁹

The first version of ecumenical modelling that we actually find Lindbeck promoting and employing is, in effect, a modified propositionalism that stresses the relativity of doctrinal claims to the historical cultures in whose terms they are couched. The ecumenical modeller does not need to construct a position within which differing doctrinal statements are compossible as contemporary statements, but a more complex narrative within which those differing statements appear as the expressions in the context of particular intellectual worldviews of claims that, expressed in the context of newer intellectual worldviews, can now be shown to be compatible.

Some such move has been part of Lindbeck's ecumenical armoury since at least 1961,⁷⁰ but it reaches its fullest expression in writings a few years later that

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17. See n. 20 for the distinction between this classic, 'preliberal' form of propositionalism and the modified propositionalism that is part of liberal theological culture.

⁷⁰ See 'Reform and Infallibility', p. 347.

talk about ‘historical situationalism’⁷¹ and a ‘decision theory of doctrinal development’.⁷² For a historical situationalist, ‘[d]octrinal development is not a matter of continuous and cumulative growth or explicitation of the Church’s knowledge of revelation’;⁷³ rather, it is a more complex matter of stating, in new historical circumstances, old truths in new terms – in order to preserve the original meaning. ‘Change in the interpretation and doctrinal formulation of scriptural truth is therefore demanded by unswerving faithfulness to that truth.’⁷⁴

His ‘decision theory’ gives this situationalism more specificity by arguing that, in some historical situations, the church may find itself faced with a question that, in the terms available in the intellectual culture of the time, poses a choice ‘between alternatives on some matter which is vital to the faith’. The church may then realise that, if the question is indeed posed in those terms, ‘only one of [the available options] is compatible with the scriptural witness’.⁷⁵ Because the question is posed in the terms of a particular historical culture, the resulting dogmatic decision takes on a conditional form: *if* the choice is presented in these terms, *then* the decision must fall this way.⁷⁶ As a result, such dogmatic decisions

⁷¹ ‘The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology’, p. 66.

⁷² *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, p. 102.

⁷³ ‘Problem of Doctrinal Development’, p. 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68. Compatibility will be tested with the scriptural witness as it is read in the light of earlier such decisions, so ‘there is a certain progressive enrichment and enlargement of the Church’s doctrinal formulations and interpretations of revelation’ (p. 67).

⁷⁶ For Lindbeck, one of the key issues at stake between Protestants and Catholics is whether there can be communally authoritative doctrinal pronouncements that do not take this form –

are best thought of as negative: they decisively rule out some particular way of interpreting the faith (i.e., they permanently rule that anyone adopting this conceptuality must not make such and such a choice within it) but because they do not mandate the adoption of the conceptuality in question they do not positively identify the correct way of interpreting the faith.⁷⁷

Lindbeck offered historical situationalism in general, and (more tentatively) a decision theory of doctrine, primarily as an approach to ecumenical dialogue. That is, he shows scant interest in arguing that this situationalist/decisionist approach will prove fruitful and accurate for intellectual historians (though he assumes that it will); his explicit interest is only in the moves that such an approach allows an ecumenist to make. Historical situationalism and decision theory offer to the ecumenist a basic narrative shape, and a set of procedures for fitting the history of particular doctrinal disagreements into that shape. This is an ecumenical toolkit – a pattern of reasoning that is one way of operationalising the basic ecumenical apprehension.

Lindbeck was thoroughly convinced that some kind of historical situationalism was already the dominant pattern of reasoning of ecumenists on all sides, that it had been crucial in enabling ecumenical advance, and that a clearer acknowledgment and formulation of such situationalism would also strengthen and facilitate further dialogue.

that are not a decision demanded of the church in this way, by the incompatibility of the alternative with scripture, but decisions demanded on other grounds and validated simply by their positive compatibility with scripture. He has in mind the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. See 'Problem of Doctrinal Development', p. 68.

⁷⁷ See 'A New Phase', p. 340; 'Reform and Infallibility', p. 352; and *Nature*, p. 19.

By the time we reach *The Nature of Doctrine*, however, Lindbeck's account has – for reasons that I will explore in the final section of this article – altered significantly, even if the alteration is more a matter of evolution than of revolution. Lindbeck now says that 'historicized *propositional* theories', even though they seem perfectly capable 'of admitting historical change and diversity', are less adequate than a (no less historicized) *regulative* theory of doctrine.⁷⁸ Much of what he says now about doctrine he could have said back in the 1960s – most of the material in the 'Taxonomy of Doctrines' section of his chapter on 'Theories of Doctrine', for instance, or the 'Marian Dogmas' section of the following chapter – but he has now altered what he says about the identification of continuity between formulations of doctrine in different historical periods.

In 1966, he said that

What keeps the church one and the same through all changes, however great, is that it always remembers certain specific historical events which culminate in Christ and continues to hope, not for just any kind of future, but for the definite future of the Lord's return . . . [T]he substantial identity of the church . . . [consists] in its memories and the hopes, sometimes vivid, sometimes dim, of its efficient and its final causes.⁷⁹

It was difficult however, to know what content to give to this claimed continuity when faced with a divided church that in its different parts and at different points in its history has made conflicting claims precisely about what it is

⁷⁸ *Nature*, p. 105, my emphasis; see the whole discussion on pp. 104–108.

⁷⁹ 'Framework of Catholic-Protestant Disagreement', p. 117.

remembering and hoping for. By the time of *The Nature of Doctrine*,⁸⁰ however, Lindbeck has decided that the most fruitful way of answering such a question is to focus not so much on the evident success of the various conflicting claims in referring to the same history and the same eschatological reality, as on the continuity across all those differences of the *practices* of the church's remembering and hoping.⁸¹

More fully, Lindbeck is suggesting that it is appropriate to talk of a deep agreement between apparently diverse doctrinal formulations if they can be shown to crystallize and nurture the same kind of practices of worship, the same kind of obedient reading of scripture, the same kind of determination to take every thought captive to Christ – if, that is, they are in agreement as prescriptions for faithful Christian practice, even while looking like propositional disagreements.

⁸⁰ This clarification is already becoming evident in 'The Infallibility Debate' (1971); for later versions see e.g., 'Problems on the Road to Unity: Infallibility', paper given at the International Ecumenical Conference; published in *Unitatis Redintegratio 1964–74: The Impact of the Decree on Ecumenism*, ed Gerard Békés and Vilmos Vajta = *Studia Anselmiana* 71 (1977), pp. 98–109.

⁸¹ Lindbeck discusses, for instance, the doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and makes the familiar historical-situationalist claim that, in order to be faithful to what is claimed in these doctrines, the church will need to reformulate them – and so demonstrate that something about them is 'distinguishable from the concepts in which they are formulated'. He says that such a reformulation will be faithful if it can be shown to 'have equivalent consequences', and then clarifies this vague claim by explaining that the reformulation will be faithful if it encodes equivalent 'guidelines for Christian discourse rather than first-order affirmations about the inner being of God or of Jesus Christ' (*Nature*, pp. 93–4).

It must be admitted that Lindbeck's brief attempt to illustrate such a regulative interpretation of doctrine by looking at Nicaea and Chalcedon is not particularly convincing. He suggests that 'at least' three rules for Christian practice are involved.

First, there is the monotheistic principle: there is only one God . . . Second, there is the principle . . . [that] the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived and died in a particular place. Third, there is the principle of what may be infelicitously called Christological maximalism: every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first [two] rules.⁸²

It is not simply that the first two of these rules are not obviously rules for Christian practice (and that it is not clear how Lindbeck thinks that they become such rules even when taken up within the third); that problem might be fairly easily remedied. More problematic is the fact that it seems unlikely that obedience to just these rules would, in the intellectual culture of the fourth century, have required one to side with the bishops of Nicaea rather than with Arius, or with the pro-Nicene settlement that emerged some decades later rather than with Eunomius. Lindbeck is, perhaps, saved by the phrase 'at least' in his introduction of these specific rules – but there is no doubt that this is a rather weak gesture in the direction of a full-blown regulative reading of Nicaea (let alone Chalcedon).

⁸² *Nature*, 94.

Nevertheless, the failure of these particular examples does not indicate the failure of a regulative approach itself,⁸³ even if it does show that harder work is going to be required in order to achieve convincing regulative interpretations. It does, however, suggest that regulative modelling doesn't have quite the obvious practical advantage, the advantage of uncomplicated facility, that Lindbeck claims for it when explaining why it is to be preferred to a modified propositionalism⁸⁴ – and that in turn might make us ask what Lindbeck's deeper reasons are for preferring this regulative approach. Part of the answer is historical: his recognition that doctrinal statements such as Nicaea and Chalcedon were, as expressions of the *regula fidei*, taken in their own day to perform some kind of regulative function. The larger part of the answer, however, lies in Lindbeck's developing postliberalism, to which we will return.

⁸³ A somewhat more convincing performance of regulative interpretation can be found in Lindbeck's reading of the doctrine of justification. In 'Article IV and Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue: The Limits of Diversity in the Understanding of Justification', in the *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 61 (1981), pp. 3–16; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 38–52, he argues that this doctrine is a 'grammatical rule' (p. 43) or a 'metatheological rule' (p. 42), capable of judging the adequacy of multiple substantive interpretations of justification – and that the doctrine is given precisely this criteriological sense by Lutheran tradition, as the doctrine above all doctrines. As a rule, the doctrine insists that 'We should not trust anything for justification except God's unconditional promises in Jesus Christ, not even the faith, virtues and merits, if there be any, which God works in us sola gratia' (p. 42).

⁸⁴ *Nature*, pp. 104–8. After all, that explanation culminates in the claim that 'The focus on praxis, and the opposition to the doctrinal relevance . . . of metaphysically oriented theological speculation, makes it easier to specify what is normative about doctrines' (*Nature*, pp. 107–8).

Whatever the *impetus* to Lindbeck's regulative account of doctrine, however, its *function* (as with his earlier situationalist account) is primarily as a construal of ecumenical reasoning practices. It is a refinement of the toolkit of reasoning moves available to ecumenists seeking to operationalise the basic ecumenical apprehension, coupled with the removal of a mistaken expectation (of demonstrable propositional agreement) that had the capacity to delay, dilate, or derail the process of ecumenical reasoning. As before, Lindbeck offers his theory of doctrine in part as a teasing out of an account of doctrine already implicit in ecumenical reasoning practices at their most fruitful, but also as a proposal for the clarification and reform of those practices, that will allow them to serve more fully the fundamental ecumenical apprehension that reconciliation without capitulation is possible.

In other words, I understand Lindbeck's main argument in *The Nature of Doctrine* as an attempt to steady and direct ecumenical reasoning. Lindbeck stands within a devout tradition of ecumenical reasoning and writes primarily to others who stand in that tradition, or to observers who seek to understand it. He draws attention to the deepest structure of that tradition's life – the basic commitment to the pursuit of unity – and then indicates various of the practices of reasoning by which that basic commitment is operationalised, more and less successfully. His proposal of a regulative theory of doctrine is, in effect, a proposed sorting and decluttering of the toolbox of practices of ecumenical reasoning – and he suggests that it is to be judged by its ability to make ecumenical reasoning practice a more fruitful pursuit of the basic ecumenical aim.

I am aware, however, that such a reading of *The Nature of Doctrine*, so firmly focused on ecumenism, might seem to sit oddly with Lindbeck's prominent references to the origin of this account of doctrine in ethnographic religious studies, and with his claims about the 'nonecumenical plausibility' it gains (and needs) from that origin.⁸⁵ In order to confirm my interpretation, therefore, we need to turn to a more careful consideration of the relationship between the ecumenical and ethnographic cultures.

3. *Between official ecumenism and ethnographic religious studies*

Lindbeck's summaries of *The Nature of Doctrine*'s argument can make it sound as though he is testing the ecumenical usefulness of an account of doctrine found *within* the culture of ethnographic religious studies.⁸⁶ Yet the quasi-legal account he gives of doctrinal rules is not in practice developed as a recognisable contribution to the internal discussions of ethnographic religious studies, nor is it the dissemination of a finding that has currency within that culture. His claims about rules are not descriptive claims about the grammar of practices discernable by participant observers in some particular Christian community, nor are they methodological claims about the nature of such observation. Lindbeck's relation to ethnographic religious studies is much more indirect than that.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ The case I aim to make is clearer in the case of the culture of ethnographic religious studies than in the case of the liberal theological culture. The ethnographic and ecumenical cultures are fairly clearly distinct, but the liberal and ecumenical cultures overlap in complex and messy ways.

Without attending to any particular performance of ethnographic description, Lindbeck notes that ethnographic religious studies as a whole tends to take religions not primarily as expressions of religious experience, nor as systems of belief, but as forms of sustained communal practice which display certain kinds of regularity. He then claims that if that is what we take religion to be, we will also see that ecumenical debate might be construed not as the attempt to articulate the unity between diverse doctrinal expressions by locating that unity in underlying experiences of the divine, nor as the attempt to adjudicate the compatibility of propositional claims (about God, salvation, the church, and so on), but as an attempt to adjudicate the compatibility of prescriptive rules for communal speech and practice – an attempt to recognise, stabilise, and promote some of the observed regularities of Christian practice. Lindbeck's central move is, in other words, to construe ecumenical dialogue as a quasi-legal affair involving the comparative analysis of community-governing rules – and to seek ad hoc support for that act of construal from the most general features of the ethnographic approach to religion.⁸⁷

We need to tread carefully at this point. The regulative account of doctrine allows its proponents, at least in principle, to identify differing doctrinal statements as diverse framings of the 'same' rules, and some at least of

⁸⁷ Lindbeck had long recognised the quasi-legal nature of ecumenical debate: it deals, he noted, with 'Magisterial pronouncements' which 'have an official, legal character, and consequently only what they actually unambiguously say, not the private opinions of their authors, is decisive. They must be read with exactly the legalistic precision which lawyers and the courts employ in dealing with law' ('Reform and Infallibility', p. 348). The construal of ecumenism in *The Nature of Doctrine* makes the analogy with legal discussion considerably stronger.

Lindbeck's statements suggest that such an identification might be the conclusion of an ethnographic investigation – that is, that such an identification might be a move proper to ethnographic religious studies. He says, for instance, that a continuity in 'basic grammar' behind changing culture-specific expressions 'is simply the kind of stability that languages and religions . . . observably have',⁸⁸ which does rather suggest that it is observation (and, specifically, some kind of neutral observation that might equally well be applied to any religion) that will lead to the conclusion of identity.

The trouble is that little or nothing in Lindbeck's actual practice of doctrinal investigation backs up this interpretation. He does not engage in ethnographic thick description of the grammars of the diverse historical and cultural practices within which doctrinal claims were produced and handled, and patiently build a case that the grammars are similar enough to warrant a claim of continuity. Rather, he plays a different kind of game altogether: he examines official doctrinal statements with a nod towards the general tenor of the intellectual cultures within which they were formulated, and proposes regulative interpretations to his ecumenical interlocutors. We might say that the grammar of the practice within which Lindbeck uses terms like 'grammar' and 'continuity' is very different from the grammar of the practice in which an ethnographer might use those words – despite all Lindbeck's references to, and claims of dependence upon, ethnographic religious studies.

In fact, if we were to attend in any detail to the grammar of ethnographic practice, we would find it singularly unsuited to Lindbeck's purpose.

⁸⁸ *Nature*, p. 83.

Ethnographic practice begins with case studies,⁸⁹ and it is good at difference – taking apparently identical terms and showing their complex embedding in the specificities of their differing contexts. Continuities and identities emerge only slowly, and tentatively. To claim the kind of centuries-spanning grammatical continuities in which Lindbeck trades so readily must, from an ethnographic point of view, be a deeply precarious endeavour.

Thankfully, Lindbeck's account leaves open another possible construal of his claims – though I am aware at this point that I am reading somewhat against the grain of at least some of Lindbeck's rhetoric in *The Nature of Doctrine*, if not of his wider practice.⁹⁰ Lindbeck's account makes sense if the claim to identify continuity between diverse doctrinal statements is not *in origin* an ethnographic claim, but an ecumenical and theological claim. That is, instead of picturing an ethnographer working towards a precarious claim of continuity, we should imagine an ecumenist, driven by the basic ecumenical apprehension discussed above and inspired by Lindbeck's postliberal construal of the reasoning practices proper to ecumenism, willing to treat diverse doctrinal expressions *as if* they were expressions of a grammatical continuity – trusting that such a presumption

⁸⁹ Lindbeck quotes Clifford Geertz to the effect that an ethnographer's task 'is not to codify abstract regularities' and 'not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them' – and yet it becomes clear in the next sentence that Lindbeck has in mind whole religions as 'cases' (*Nature*, p. 115).

⁹⁰ Lindbeck identifies as the 'major problem with the book' the contradiction between his insistence that 'Christian theology must not be built on foundations other than biblical foundations' and his apparent building of his account of doctrine on nonbiblical intellectual foundations (Interview with John Wright, p. 71). His reliance on ethnographic religious studies was supposed to be 'ad hoc and unsystematic' ('Foreword to the German Edition', p. 198).

will be fruitful. Such a step of faith would, of course, almost certainly rely on a *prima facie* attentiveness to the contexts and claims involved, but only as an enabling condition, not as the sole ground on which the step was made. The regulative theory of doctrine that Lindbeck offers would then give a basic shape to the ecumenist's work of modelling, which would in turn give more precise content to the claim to identify continuity. It would push the ecumenist to construe the diversity she finds as a set of variations upon a theme, or variations upon a deep grammar of practice – or at least to see how far she can get with such an attempt at construal.

Of course, within the structure provided by the initial ecumenical/theological apprehension, and as part of the process of more detailed construal, the ecumenist might well turn to thick description of particular moments in the continuity being explored, and such attentiveness might well to a certain extent test or confirm the ecumenical construal. Lindbeck's approach certainly leaves space for such a move, even if it is not a marked element of his own practice. But the basic ecumenical apprehension of unity is not itself generated by the ethnography; the ethnographic work in this case would be an *ad hoc* borrowing, within a structure that it could not itself generate – and, as such, a borrowing about which ethnographers themselves would be likely to be at best ambivalent. Ethnographers would be likely to see this, perhaps pejoratively, as a move based on 'religious conviction' – and they would of course be right.⁹¹

At various points, Lindbeck highlights the confession 'Jesus is Lord' as expressing in concise form one of the most basic grammatical structures of

⁹¹ In conversation, Timothy Jenkins has drawn a contrast between ethnographers working from parts to wholes and theologians from wholes to parts, which has shaped my thinking here.

Christian life,⁹² and it can serve as a useful example here – perhaps *the* example. An ethnographic approach would need to pay attention to the different practices of identification and description that, in each particular context in which this confession is made, give content to the name ‘Jesus’, and it would need to pay attention to the patterns of life shaped around those practices that give content to the concept ‘Lord’. ‘Jesus’ and ‘Lord’ would be given distinctive intrasystematic content in each case study, and supposedly common points of reference in the scriptures and the traditions of the church would appear only through the lenses of the particular uses of those sources in each context. Any attempt to move from there to claims about Christianity-spanning continuity in this confession would need to travel with painstaking and tentative slowness.

A postliberal ecumenical theologian, on the other hand, begins by saying that all these diverse examples of Christian life are to be *taken* as different ways of living in response to the Lordship of Christ. That is, such an ecumenist makes a decision (albeit an educated decision) to construe in that way, insofar as it turns out to be possible, *all* the Christian communities she faces. She would start any thick description of particular examples of Christian life with this presumption already in place – that is, the presumption that they can indeed be read as forms of ‘discipleship’ – though she will be open, in principle, to the possibility in any given case of the kind of slow disconfirmation that is indistinguishable from disillusionment. To the extent that it does turn out to be possible, when starting from this presumption, to construe each particular case study of Christian life as

⁹² See ‘The Future of the Dialogue: Pluralism or an Eventual Synthesis of Doctrine’, in *Christian Action and Openness to the World*, ed. Joseph Papin (Villanova, VA: Villanova University Press, 1970), pp. 37–51: p. 48; see also ‘The Infallibility Debate’, pp. 110–11.

an instance of lived discipleship, those cases will become confirmations that Christianity can indeed be construed as having this deep grammar. Of course, on its own this is a circular argument: if construed as instances of discipleship, all these case studies of Christian life turn out to be instances of discipleship, and any that do not are declared not to be case studies of Christian life. The success of this ecumenical move nevertheless goes beyond the purely circular insofar as it makes possible an ecumenical conversation between the various cases: it creates a certain commensurability.

Precisely to the extent that all the cases are read as instances of lived discipleship – as differing forms of obedience to the Lordship of Jesus – it becomes possible first to ask whether the construals of Lordship and the identifications of Jesus implied in the practice of each case stand within the boundaries created by the Christian tradition's history of dogmatic definitions understood as rules for Christian practice. And, second, to the extent that these cases are read as instances of lived discipleship that do stand within the boundaries created by that history of dogmatic definition, it becomes possible to read them as an acceptable – or, better, an *enriching* – variety. To adopt an idiom somewhat different from Lindbeck's, we might say that, within these bounds, the differences that ethnographic work uncovers can now be construed as potential gifts and challenges circulating within the one Christian faith, the one Body of Christ – each filling out more of the church's ongoing communal exploration of what discipleship can mean in practice.⁹³

⁹³ Lindbeck's focus is, in practice, far more on the former: the kind of commensuration that makes possible the mutual asking of serious dogmatic questions. There are gestures towards the

The previous section concluded that *The Nature of Doctrine* was to be construed as an intervention in the ecumenical movement's practices of reasoning, but noted that this claim sat oddly with Lindbeck's apparent deference to ethnographic religious studies. In this section, I have therefore traversed the same territory, but with a more explicit eye to the relation between the reasoning practices that Lindbeck proposes and the reasoning practices of ethnographic religious studies – and to the differing place of case studies in each practice – and my conclusion has been the same. Lindbeck's account of doctrine is not *derived* from ethnographic religious studies, and its success does not lie in its plausibility to participants in the ethnographic religious studies culture – indeed, Lindbeck's concern for nonecumenical plausibility risks making his account *less* plausible, to the extent that he misrepresents the grammar of his own practice. Rather, Lindbeck's account is made possible by his emerging postliberalism, and its success lies in its ability to make possible various kinds of ecumenical conversation between Christian communities, enabling ecumenical dialogue partners to recognise in one another the same rule of faith, to challenge one another about the limits within which such life can properly be lived, and to receive their remaining differences as challenging and enriching gifts.

4. Toward a postliberal theology of doctrine

Lindbeck's account is made possible by his emerging postliberalism, I just said – and that brings me to my final question. What, precisely, does the emerging postliberal theological culture have to do with Lindbeck's argument? He turns to

latter – as when, in 'The Future of the Dialogue', p. 37, he speaks about 'an irreducible yet enriching diversity' – but the exploration of such enriching diversity is not his *métier*.

that emerging theological culture in his final chapter, describing his account there as ‘an addendum to the main argument of the book, but a necessary one.’⁹⁴ He presents it as an exploration of ‘the implications for theological method of a cultural-linguistic approach to religion’, necessary in order to demonstrate that the fruitfulness of that approach is not limited to the ecumenical sphere. That is, however, a fairly drastic simplification of the connections between Lindbeck’s emerging postliberalism and his regulative construal of ecumenical practice.

First, though he presents his new construal of ecumenical reasoning as made possible at the conceptual level by borrowings from ethnographic religious studies and from the Wittgensteinian philosophical tradition that lies behind it, his actual borrowings from that culture are *ad hoc* and shallow. I see no reason to doubt that they did *assist* with his rethinking of ecumenism, but it is hard to see either in *The Nature of Doctrine* or in the other works that preceded it that these borrowings *drove* that rethinking. Far more important for his developing ideas, and far more evident in the works that precede *The Nature of Doctrine*, if not in the book itself, is the turn to the apophatic reading of Aquinas that I described earlier in this article.⁹⁵

Second, the development of Lindbeck’s regulative construal of ecumenical practice is bound up with his discernment of the increasingly diasporic, post-Constantinian situation in which the church now finds itself, and his

⁹⁴ *Nature*, p. 112.

⁹⁵ As Emery says, ‘Aquinas thus *enables* Lindbeck to render account of the place of truth in the cultural-linguistic theory. It is also *on this basis* that doctrinal statements can be understood as “rules of language” and that the propositional content can be placed on a secondary level’. Emery, ‘Lindbeck’s Reading’, p. 287, my emphases.

disillusionment with existing resources for facing that change. His ecumenical proposal is not simply an attempt to clarify and strengthen the reasoning practices of the official ecumenism: it is an attempt to harness those practices to the meeting of a discerned need – which is precisely the need for a catholic sectarianism dedicated to the service of the world. After all, for Lindbeck, ecumenism is nothing more, and nothing less, than an attempt to preserve and interpret the traditional commitments, the historical distinctives, of the Christian tradition in a form capable of uniting rather than dividing diasporic Christian communities.

There are two unavoidable circularities here. First, Lindbeck's account of the need to turn to a regulative construal of ecumenical reasoning practice is focused on its ability to resolve anomalies – and I have already argued that such a narrative (of the emergence of anomalies, the failure of existing accounts to resolve them, and successful resolution at the hands of a new account) can be told only from the point of view of the new theological culture that it supports. There is (as Lindbeck knows) something unavoidably circular about such reasoning. Second, Lindbeck's narration of the broader 'signs of the times',⁹⁶ and of the ability of a postliberal theology and a regulative ecumenism to respond to those signs, involves a theological discernment – but it is, as Lindbeck says, a postliberal rather than liberal way of 'reading the signs of the times': a discernment fostered within the very postliberal theology and regulative ecumenism that it supports. These circularities are unavoidable and benign, but they are not the stuff of knock-down arguments: they convince to the extent that

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

they make compelling sense of a wide range of material – to the extent, Lindbeck might say, that they demonstrate ‘assimilative powers’.⁹⁷ Lindbeck’s catholic sectarian vision, we might say, is not an ‘addendum’: it is just as much a foundation of his argument as is his identification of ecumenical anomalies.

If we turn to a third element of Lindbeck’s postliberalism, we find a similar complexity. Earlier, I explained that in his general construal of the ecumenical task, the Lindbeckian ecumenist is to ask whether the construals of Lordship and the identifications of Jesus implied in any given instance of Christian practice stand within the boundaries created by the Christian tradition’s history of dogmatic definitions understood as rules for Christian practice. Now, when Lindbeck allows himself to speak directly as a postliberal theologian, it becomes clear that it is fundamentally *faithfulness to scripture* that these rules are supposed to enable and preserve. Taken this way, his regulative account of doctrine he gives becomes a way of interpreting and operationalising the *sola scriptura*.

This turn to scripture is not simply an addendum to the argument of his book. It is an extension that has the capacity to be a wholesale *recasting* of his general ecumenical proposal. He is suggesting that the practices that are governed by doctrine can be construed, fundamentally, as reading practices – as practices by which the text is read around Christ, and practices by which the whole world is read through the text, which are the hermeneutical equivalents of the ‘Jesus is Lord’ confession. Doctrines are not simply rules for Christian practice – they are (with varying degrees of directness) rules for the Christian practice of scriptural

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.131. This is not quite the context in which Lindbeck uses the phrase.

reading. Or, to put it another way, the practice that doctrine regulates is to be considered a form of lived exegesis.

Lindbeck's strategy in relegating his hermeneutical and catholic sectarian claims to the status of 'addendum' is, of course, clear. His overriding concern is to promote fruitful ecumenical engagement for the sake of the church and for the sake of the world. In order to do that, he believes he needs to adopt a self-denying ordinance: a deliberate ecumenical neutrality. He does not need to be theologically neutral in any absolute way (despite some of his claims to the contrary), but he does need to avoid taking sides on the issues that divide the churches – so that his invitation to the regulative way of pursuing ecumenism will be an invitation that can truly be received by both sides. It is therefore inevitable that he will downplay the role of his catholic sectarian vision in grounding his argument, and concentrate on the narrower ground of ecumenical anomalies: catholic sectarianism is likely to be a controversial claim for some participants in the ecumenical conversation. It is also no less inevitable that he will downplay his proposed hermeneutical recasting of his whole argument: such a recasting is a form of his deep Lutheran commitment to the *sola scriptura*, and he is fully aware that it is a proposed recasting that might sit oddly with his Catholic interlocutors.

However, those forms of downplaying make sense only within a strategy focused on the development of a general account capable of setting the terms of ecumenical engagement equally for all participants. If, instead, one regards even the setting of such terms as an ecumenical task – a task for negotiation of *mutual* ground between differing construals of doctrine and of the reasoning practices appropriate to it, rather than the task of establishing a form of *neutral* ground – it

becomes possible to downplay this strategic downplaying, and to retrieve a thoroughly theological Lindbeck. It becomes possible to read *The Nature of Doctrine* as a sketch of a postliberal *theology* of doctrine – a postliberal theological construal of the kind of reasoning needed for fruitful ecumenical engagement.⁹⁸

A postliberal theology of doctrine after Lindbeck will draw on an account of the knowledge of God in order to insist that it is holy lives, communal and individual, that refer most truly to God, and that propositional statements refer only in a derivate way – even if a good deal of work is still needed to clarify the relationship between propositional truth and the truth of practice, or between the forms of correspondence to God available to creatures by God’s grace and the propositional claims that find a place within those forms of correspondence.

A postliberal theology of doctrine after Lindbeck will be inextricable from a biblical hermeneutics. It will recognise that doctrinal settlements are unavoidably exegetical settlements – even if we need, in Lindbeck’s wake, to continue to explore the ecumenical limits of that claim, and are able now to draw on a wider range of accounts of scripture and scriptural interpretation than Lindbeck had available to him in 1984. One of the resources that such an exploration will be able to draw on will be Lindbeck’s own later work, in which

⁹⁸ Back in 1997, in my first published article, I wrote that ‘where Lindbeck had a cultural-linguistic theory, Frei had a Christology’ (‘Frei’s Christology and Lindbeck’s Cultural-Linguistic Theory’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50.1 (1997), pp. 83–96: p. 95.) In the terms of this present article, I was saying that *The Nature of Doctrine* was not driven by the substantively theological concerns of the postliberal theological culture, but by the culture of ethnographic religious studies. I was wrong.

he makes the borrowed biblical clothes of *The Nature of Doctrine* more fully his own, especially by means of his efforts to overcome a Christian hermeneutical forgetfulness of Israel.⁹⁹

And, finally, a postliberal theology after Lindbeck will involve an ecclesiology in which the church is construed by faith as one and catholic (united in the *regula fidei*, and in an ongoing exchange of harmonious differences within those bounds) and as holy and apostolic (set apart from the world, in part by means of those bounds, as sign, witness, and servant). It will therefore be a theology of doctrine that calls for the austere work of modelling the basic doctrinal framework capable of holding the churches together in intensive exchange over scripture, *and* for something like an ethnographic attentiveness to the wild profusion of ways in which particular Christian communities in practice fill in the spaces created by the *regula fidei* – the patterns of lived exegesis, lived truth-claim about God, that are the raw materials of that ecumenical exchange.

⁹⁹ Peter Ochs quotes Lindbeck as saying to him in 2002: ‘Christian efforts to forget Israel and thus replace Israel’s covenant are co-implicated in Christian efforts to read the Gospel narrative of Jesus Christ independently of reading the Old Testament narrative of Israel, and such readings are the foundation of Christian efforts to read the Gospel narrative as [if] it were a collection of determinate propositions or determinate rules of behavior, rather than as Scripture. *The primary goal of postliberal reformation is to help the church recover its practice of reading the Gospel narrative as Scripture*’ (Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 48, his emphasis. Ochs’ chapter is an extraordinary excavation of the logic of Lindbeck’s later hermeneutics.